

Worst factory fire in Bangladeshi history

Peter Symonds
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At least 112 workers died and 150 were injured in Bangladesh's worst-ever factory fire, which gutted the eight-storey Tazreen Fashions building in the Ashulia industrial zone on Saturday night. The fire began in the ground floor, trapping hundreds of workers on the upper storey. Several died and more were injured as they jumped to escape the blaze.

Fire fighters took hours to bring the fire under control and to remove the badly burned bodies of those who died in the upper floors. Major Mohammad Mahbub, the fire department's operations director, told the Associated Press that there were no escape exits leading outside the building.

"The factory had three staircases, and all of them were down through the ground floor. So the workers could not come out when the fire engulfed the building," Mahbub said. "Had there been at least one emergency exit through outside the factory, the casualties would have been much lower."

The factory opened in May 2010 and employed about 1,500 workers, making T-shirts, polo shirts and fleece jackets. While the exact cause of the fire is not known, Fire Service Director General Abu Naim Mohammad Shahidullah told reporters that it might have originated from an electrical short circuit.

Firefighters rescued workers who managed to clamber onto the roof. Others escaped using bamboo scaffolding used by construction workers making modifications to the building. An estimated 600 workers were in the factory, working overtime at the time of the blaze.

Speaking to the *Guardian*, a survivor, Mohammad Shahbul Alam, explained: "It was 6.45 p.m. when the

fire alarm was raised. I rushed out. I heard that [grills blocking the way to] the second and third floors were locked. When I came down, I saw fire at both the stairways that the ladies used. I still have not found any trace of my sister-in-law."

Another worker, Abu Taleb, told the Bangladesh-based *Independent* that fire fighting equipment inside the factory was inadequate and most staff received no fire safety training.

Sabina Yasmine told Associated Press that her daughter-in-law died in the fire and her son was missing. "I want the factory owner to be hanged," she said. "For him, many have died, many have gone.

Bangladeshi authorities sent in police, army soldiers and border guards, including the notorious Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), to control the thousands of anxious and angry relatives gathered outside the factory for any news. Industrial Police official Moktar Hossain told *bdnews24.com* that the security forces baton-charged the crowd and fired teargas after relatives denounced authorities for delays in the rescue operation.

The government, employers and officials are already mounting a damage control operation aimed at deflecting public anger in Bangladesh and minimising the impact on the country's lucrative garment industry, which has been repeatedly criticised for its low wages and poor health and safety record.

The industry, which operates some 5,000 sweatshops, produces clothes for major corporations in the United States and Europe. Garments comprise around 80 percent of Bangladesh exports, with earnings of around \$19 billion for the last financial year. More than 2.2

million people, mostly women, are employed in the industry.

The Bangladesh Garments Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) has announced compensation of 100,000 Bangladeshi taka (\$1,200) to the families of each victim. The Hong Kong-based giant Li & Fung, which sources garments for major companies, declared that it was “distressed” and promised a matching amount. These pitiful sums amount to nothing more than hush money to buy the silence of the victims’ families.

BGMEA President Shafiul Islam Mohiuddin, claimed that most buyers carry out regular safety audits. “If we didn’t comply with labour laws and safety regulations, we would lose our business,” he declared. These comments are a sham. The lack of inspectors means that the country’s fire safety regulations are routinely flouted.

Western corporations, concerned about their public image, have initiated a system of safety audits, but their cosmetic character was exposed by Saturday’s fire. According to Associated Press, an audit conducted by “an ethical sourcing assessor” for Wal-Mart in May 2011 gave Tazreen Fashions an orange or “high risk” safety rating. Following a further inspection in August 2011, the company was given a yellow or “medium risk” report and another audit was due in a year.

Wal-Mart spokesman Kevin Gardner said it was not clear if this year’s inspection had been conducted, or if the factory was still making products for Wal-Mart. Wal-Mart will only suspend orders if a factory is rated “orange” three times in a two-year period. “There was no indication whether the violations had been fixed since the May [2011] inspection. Neither Tazreen’s owner nor Tuba Group officials could be reached for comment,” Associated Press stated.

Ineke Zeldenrust, international coordinator for the Amsterdam-based Clean Clothes Campaign, said that global clothing brands like Tommy Hilfiger and the Gap and those sold by Walmart had “known for years that many of the factories they choose to work with are death traps. Their failure to take action amounts to

criminal negligence.”

The Tazreen Fashions’ blaze is just the latest and worst of a series of factory fires in Bangladesh and other countries used as cheap labour platforms. According to the Clean Clothes Campaign, more than 500 Bangladeshi workers have died in factory fires since 2006.

In February 2006, at least 54 workers were killed and over 100 seriously injured when a textile factory burned down in Chittagong. Many of those killed or badly injured were unable to escape because the main entrance and other gates were locked. In September, nearly 300 workers died in a garment factory owned by Ali Enterprises in the Pakistani city of Karachi—again the high death toll was due to locked exits and grated windows.

An assistant to Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina Wajed issued a perfunctory statement expressing shock over loss of lives in the factory fire. Her government, however, is not concerned about the victims, but in ensuring the continued “international competitiveness” of the Bangladeshi industry over its cheap labour rivals.

The security forces have repeatedly been deployed to suppress strikes and protests by textile workers fighting for better pay and conditions. Some 300 factories in the Ashulia industrial zone shut down in June after violent clashes between workers and police. With the collaboration of the trade unions, the government suppressed widespread strikes, lifting monthly pay to just \$38.

The government’s response to the latest fire will be to ensure that the exploitation of Bangladeshi garment workers continues unabated, resulting in further human tragedies.



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